



# **Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks**

## **DECISION NOTICE**

### **for Carpenter Creek Fish Barrier**

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks  
Region 4  
4600 Giant Springs Road  
Great Falls, MT 59405  
Phone (406) 454-5855

#### **DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED PROJECT**

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to construct a barrier in Carpenter Creek to protect genetically pure westslope cutthroat trout (WCT). Carpenter Creek is a small 2<sup>nd</sup> order stream that enters Belt Creek just downstream of Neihart, MT. The Carpenter Creek drainage currently supports two genetically pure populations of WCT in mainstem Carpenter Creek and Haystack Creek. Both of these populations became isolated from Belt Creek over 60 years ago when mining resulted in a stream reach incapable of supporting fish because of poor water quality, extending from Squaw Creek down to the confluence of Carpenter Creek and Belt Creek. Current and future efforts to clean up the mine will have the unwanted impact of removing the current chemical barrier that isolates the native WCT from nonnatives in Belt Creek. Removal of this chemical barrier would ultimately result in increased competition and hybridization with invading nonnatives. As such, the department has proposed constructing a barrier to isolate and protect the genetically pure WCT.

#### **ALTERNATIVES TO THE PROPOSED PROJECT**

##### **1) PROPOSED ACTION**

The proposed action involves construction of a fish barrier on Carpenter Creek that would prevent nonnative trout from moving upstream into Carpenter Creek as water quality improves. The predicted benefits of the proposed action include:

- Protection and conservation of two genetically pure WCT populations inhabiting approximately 1.5 miles of Carpenter Creek and a small isolated population of WCT in Haystack Creek by preventing upstream colonization by rainbow trout.
- Would allow for colonization of an additional 1.5 miles of Carpenter Creek by WCT as mine cleanup activities continue and water quality improves in Carpenter

Creek.

- Would allow for reconnection of the Carpenter Creek and Haystack Creek WCT populations, as water quality conditions improve.
- Reduction in the risk of potential listing of WCT under the Endangered Species Act.

## **2) NO ACTION**

The no action alternative would be to not construct a fish barrier. As mine clean-up activities continue, and water quality improves, rainbow trout in Belt Creek would eventually move up Carpenter Creek and hybridize with the currently genetically pure WCT. As a result, the objectives of the project would not be met and a genetically pure WCT population would be lost.

## **PUBLIC PROCESS AND COMMENTS**

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of a proposed action to the human and physical environment. In compliance with MEPA, a Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) was completed for the proposed project by FWP and released for public comment on April 15, 2016. Public comments on the proposed action were taken for 36 days through 5:00 p.m. on May 20, 2016. Press releases were sent to the Great Falls Tribune and Billings Gazette. The EA was also posted on the FWP webpage: <http://fwp.mt.gov/publicnotices> beginning April 15th. Copies of the EA or electronic notification of its availability were available to interested parties and adjacent landowners.

Because this project is partly located on property managed by the U.S. Forest Service, the Forest Service hosted an open house to discuss this project (and others) in Neihart on Wednesday, April 27, 2016. Forest Service and FWP personnel were available to answer any questions regarding this project.

## **SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENT**

FWP received two written comments, both received electronically.

One comment expressed strong support for construction of the fish barrier to preserve the genetically pure WCT. The commenter outlined that while a barrier may not be 100% effective in an extreme event, it is the best available technology from protecting the fishery from unwanted, irreversible hybridization with nonnative trout.

One comment expressed concern regarding the length of time the barrier will be in place and "it is not nice to fool with Mother Nature." In response to this comment, while the barrier will not remain in place in perpetuity, the construction of the barrier will provide time to restore and enhance WCT populations in the area and possibly replicate this population in other drainages in the future. As managers of the resource, it is FWP's responsibility to, when possible, preserve WCT populations that are threatened due to previous actions by humans that spread nonnative species.

No public comments were submitted for the record at the public meeting in Neihart. However, approximately 12 to 15 people attended and the majority of the attendees were supportive of the project.

#### **DECISION NOTICE**

Based on the Environmental Assessment (EA) and the applicable laws, regulations, and policies, I have determined that this action will not have a significant effect on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the EA is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required. By this Decision Notice, the unaltered Draft EA is hereby made the Final EA.

The Final EA may be viewed on the MFWP's website, or obtained upon request from the MFWP's Region 4 Headquarters.

June 1, 2016



Gary Bertellotti  
Regional Supervisor